

SENATE RESOLUTION 33

By Lamar

A RESOLUTION to honor Tent City and the Fayette County freedom movement.

WHEREAS, in Fayette County in April 1959, Burton Dodson was on trial for the murder of a white man, a man who was believed to be participating in a mob with the intention to lynch Mr. Dodson; and

WHEREAS, though the population of Fayette County at that time was approximately seventy percent Black, Black residents of the community were not registered to vote and therefore ineligible to serve on the jury; this circumstance inspired Burton Dodson's defense counsel and the first Black lawyer to represent any person at the Fayette County Courthouse, James F. Estes, to launch a campaign to register Black Fayette Countians to vote; and

WHEREAS, Mr. Estes recruited John McFerren and Harpman Jameson, longtime Black residents and landowners in Fayette County, to help him in his mission; the two men raised funds to hire a court reporter to record the trial proceedings and launched the Fayette County Civic and Welfare League; and

WHEREAS, in July 1959, the League began its voter registration drive; in addition to Mr. McFerren and Mr. Jameson, the members of the League were Rufus Abernathy, Ed Brooks, Roy Brown, Isaiah Harris, John Lewis, Houston Malone, Leavearn Towles, and William Towles, Jr.; and

WHEREAS, the noble endeavor was met with great opposition, with Black residents being harassed, intimidated, arrested, and obstructed from registering to vote; in August 1959, Black registered voters were blocked from voting in Fayette County primaries, and the U.S. Department of Justice intervened; and

WHEREAS, on November 16, 1959, the Department filed a lawsuit against the Fayette County Democratic Executive Committee (FDEC), the first voting rights lawsuit under the Civil Rights Act of 1957, and in January 1960, the Civil Rights Commission inspected the Fayette County voter rolls to investigate claims of voter disenfranchisement. On April 25, 1960, the parties entered into a consent decree whereby FDEC agreed to remove race-based barriers to registration and voting; and

WHEREAS, in an escalation of retaliation, landowners evicted Black families from their land, stripping them of their homes and jobs, beginning in December 1959 with Eddie and Mary B. Williams, the first sharecroppers to be evicted for registering to vote; and

WHEREAS, the Williams family found refuge on the land of Shepard Towles, a Black landowner in the area; John McFerren helped the family set up "drab-green surplus Army tents" to serve as temporary housing. In quick succession, more families were evicted from their homes, and the resultant encampment was soon christened Tent City; and

WHEREAS, at its height, Tent City was home to more than 100 children; due to the growing number of families in need, Gertrude Beasley, a Black woman, expanded the encampment by making her land available to families, some of whom lived in Tent City for more than two years; and

WHEREAS, John and Viola McFerren and June Dowdy coordinated an aid fund of food, clothing, and other resources to assist the evicted families; James Puryear, a Black Fayette County resident, offered to drive his commercial truck to pick up donations across the county, and college students across the country came to Fayette County to support the families living in Tent City and participate in the freedom movement; and

WHEREAS, from almost the inception of the movement, Black women played an integral part in creating infrastructure through the activities of the original Fayette County Civic and Welfare League; in addition to traveling around the country speaking to share the plight of

Fayette County residents, Viola H. McFerren helped organize mass demonstration protests and was a featured speaker at protests throughout the late 1960s. In 1966, she was appointed by President Lyndon Baines Johnson to serve on the National Community Representative Advisory Counsel to the National Office of Economic Opportunity (the Anti-Poverty Program). In that position, she played a pivotal role in bringing the Head Start Program to Fayette County; and

WHEREAS, Minnie Harris Jameson, the wife of Harpman Jameson, was the secretary of the League from 1959 through 2001; she planned and participated in demonstration marches and prepared correspondence and press releases for the League. She was the record keeper for donated clothes, food, household items, and other items needed by both evicted and poor African-American families. The records Minnie Jameson created or compiled about League activities are now housed in Special Collections, University of Memphis Libraries; these primary source materials have been cited by scholars and authors memorializing the history of the movement; and

WHEREAS, white student activists from Cornell University, University of Chicago, Oberlin College, and other places came to the aid of Fayette County activists; they helped to fund the activists by donating money to the movement; they helped the League build a building, called "the Community Center," for its mass meetings; they registered Blacks to vote and provided strategic assistance to activists in public relations with the press; and

WHEREAS, members of the movement also coordinated a media strategy to broadcast the unconstitutional and inhumane treatment of families living in Tent City; due to these efforts, in August 1960, Ted Poston, a Black reporter at the *New York Post*, investigated and wrote an expose on the retaliation against the voter registration drive, and the movement was featured in the *New York Times* and on Barry Gray's WMAC radio program; and

WHEREAS, this culminated in a lawsuit being filed in December 1960 against the landowners who had evicted the Black tenants and in President John F. Kennedy ordering a

surplus of food be sent to Fayette County on June 14, 1961, and on July 26, 1962, landowners were enjoined from engaging in any acts for the purpose of interfering with the right to vote and to vote for candidates in public office; and

WHEREAS, however, despite the 1962 decree, landowners continued to evict Black sharecroppers, ostensibly due to mechanization, though this only occurred where Black tenants registered to vote; and

WHEREAS, Tent City and the Fayette County freedom movement comprised one of the first rural, grassroots movements that was initiated, organized, and maintained by Black farmers and sharecroppers in a local community and served as a catalyst to the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1960; and

WHEREAS, the original Fayette County Civic and Welfare League continued its movement throughout the 1960s with an urgent civil rights agenda that included increasing voter registration campaigns, desegregation of Fayette County Schools and public establishments, literacy programs to promote civic engagement among Blacks, and efforts to improve economic conditions of the Black community through job creation; and

WHEREAS, near the end of the 1960s when other communities had turned their attention to the Vietnam War, inflation, and other national matters, the *New York Times*, in 1969, described the Fayette County Movement as "one of the longest sustained civil rights protests in the nation"; and

WHEREAS, this important moment in American history has been duly honored and memorialized through the Benjamin Hooks Institute at the University of Memphis, which hosts the website *Tent City: The Story of Civil Rights in Fayette County, Tennessee*; and

WHEREAS, *Freedom's Front Line: Fayette County, Tennessee* (2008) is a thirty-minute documentary on the movement copyrighted by the University of Memphis; in November 2022, Memphis International Airport and the Hooks Institute co-hosted an exhibit on the Fayette

County Civil Rights Movement by noted, internationally renowned Art Shay. This exhibit is available to view by the public (for one year) and does not require going through TSA security; and

WHEREAS, further homage has been paid to Tent City and the Fayette County freedom movement through a multitude of literature including international academic scholarship and children's books, as well as the recent release of the second edition of Robert Hamburger's *Our Portion of Hell: Fayette County, Tennessee: An Oral History of the Struggle for Civil Rights*; and

WHEREAS, it is most fitting that we join in recognizing this seminal moment in civil rights history; now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE OF THE ONE HUNDRED THIRTEENTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, that we recognize the important work of all those involved with Tent City and the Fayette County freedom movement, honoring their legacy and contributions to civil rights in Tennessee and to making this State and the United States a more perfect union.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that an appropriate copy of this resolution be prepared for presentation with this final clause omitted from such copy.